DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 116 RC 023 418

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TITLE Partnering with Latino Migrant Families of Children with Disabilities: A Challenge, a Mission.
PUB DATE 2002-03-00
NOTE 6p.; In: No Child Left Behind: The Vital Role of Rural Schools. Annual National Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (22nd, Reno, NV, March 7-9, 2002); see RC 023 405.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Awareness; Culturally Relevant Education; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Immigrants; Limited English Speaking; *Migrant Children; Migrant Education; *Parent Participation; *Parent Teacher Cooperation; Special Education

ABSTRACT

Parental involvement among Latino migrant families is hindered by their unique lifestyle. Teachers should develop strategies that facilitate their partnership with migrant parents. Teachers must become aware of their own personal beliefs and biases and of the migrant family lifestyle and its challenges, which are compounded when a child has disabilities. Appropriate information must be provided in the families' native language to enhance their opportunity to navigate and participate in the educational system while eliminating feelings of intimidation. This is especially important for parents of children with disabilities as they must be involved in the decision-making process for their child's appropriate educational placement and program planning. Since migrant workers work long hours and often lack transportation, their participation in school activities can be facilitated by scheduling activities on evenings and weekends, providing childcare and transportation, promoting home visits, and celebrating school activities within the migrant community. Teachers can ease the feelings of isolation experienced by migrant families by acting as a liaison between families and community resources; working with agricultural industries to enhance families' knowledge of their new environment; providing social skills education in class; incorporating migrant students' cultures, values, and experiences into the curriculum; and observing the migrant community's festivities and historical events. Migrant families' high mobility rate can be addressed by developing a welcoming unit to facilitate student integration into the group and by keeping an academic portfolio. (Contains 12 references.) (TD)

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ED 463 116

Partnering with Latino Migrant Families of Children with Disabilities:

A Challenge, a Mission

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PARTNERING WITH LATINO MIGRANT FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES: A CHALLENGE, A MISSION

The unstable social, political, and economical climate in Latin America stimulates the influx of Latino immigrants into the United States every year. The rapidly growing number of Latino migrant families in the nation impacts the demographics of our school population as their children gain access to public education (Williams, 1992). Conversely, while the face of our public education is becoming dramatically diverse, the teacher force remains mostly composed of white females from the mainstream culture.

Children of migrant farm workers face more risk factors for school failure than other immigrant children (Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995). Risk factors correlated with school failure among this population include 1) high mobility and interrupted schooling, 2) poverty, and 3) lack of access to schooling. Students from culturally diverse backgrounds are over represented in special education classrooms while they are suffering form disproportionately low rates of school achievement (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002; Patton, 1998). In spite the constant questioning about the appropriateness of the pedagogical methodologies and the equity issues regarding the education of migrant students, it is not uncommon for teachers to frequently attribute children's school failure to a lack of parental involvement in the education process.

Many teachers conceive parental involvement as preparing students for school, attending school activities and meetings, and responding favorably to teachers' requests (Lareau, 1989). These expectations easily translate into demands as teachers of children with disabilities attempt to establish a partnership with parents to appropriately serve and attend to the child with special needs. Teachers' expectations and demands regarding parental involvement could lead into conflicts as teachers interact with Latino migrant parents of children with disabilities.

Latino migrant parents of children with disabilities face multiple challenges. Like other migrant families, they must attempt to satisfy the basic family needs, cope with a cultural and linguistic environment extraneous to them, and adapt to the unique lifestyle of a migrant worker. The presence of a disability in their child places additional demands as they try to provide for the special needs of their child with disabilities. For example, teachers require parental involvement and active participation in their child's education in order to attend the child's special educational needs.

As Latino migrant workers attempt to satisfy the basic needs of their families, their daily circumstances may prevent them in fulfilling the envisioned parental involvement demands. Although most migrant parents want their children to be successful in school, their inability to respond in the traditional way, leads teachers into believing that these migrant parents are disengaged and do not value the education of their children (Lareau, 1989).

Some Latino migrant parents are aware of teachers' expectations regarding their level of school involvement and participation. Moreover, these parents must deal with the multiple barriers that impede their participation in school meetings and activities, and in assisting their children with schoolwork. Cultural and linguistic differences, high mobility rates, time constraints, and feelings of isolation, are some of the multiple factors that may hinder parental involvement among the Latino migrant population. Nonetheless, these parents could contribute to their child's education as they represent highly valued emotional and motivational resources (Martinez, Velazquez, 2000).

To develop a successful parent involvement program with Latino migrant families of children with disabilities, it is necessary to recognize that the traditional approach to parental involvement may fail given the unique characteristics of the Latino migrant workers' lifestyle (Valdes, 1996). In the following section strategies and ideas to enhance parental involvement among this population are briefly described.

RC 023418

A challenge, a mission

As teachers face the challenge to satisfy the needs and demands of the increasing number of Latino migrant students with disabilities in their classrooms, it is imperative to prepare them appropriately to meet the challenges and increase the success rate of these children. Although schools face distinct issues that respond to their unique settings and student populations, there are several general strategies or suggestions that could enhance parent-teacher partnerships among Latino migrant families.

As in any partnership, both parties are equally important and play a critical role. Therefore, teachers and parents must participate equivalently in this partnership for it to be a successful one. Although parity in the level of participation should be a goal, it may be an unrealistic one given the multiple challenges faced by the Latino migrant families. Consequently, teachers' initiative and leadership will be decisive in establishing a successful partnership. The strategies and suggestions described below are mostly for teachers and school personnel, yet it is not intended to portray the Latino migrant families as passive or incapable of taking a leading role. In addition, the challenges addressed in this paper are considered critical yet not an exhaustive discussion of the multiple challenges faced by this population.

Cultural and linguistic differences

Teachers' beliefs, attitudes and values, the essence of subjective culture, will most likely influence their classroom practices and interactions (Banks, 1993). Therefore, teachers who are serving students from diverse backgrounds must become aware of their personal beliefs and biases. Instruction that is insensitive to cultural and linguistic differences or is blinded by an equity blindfold could only intensify the mismatch between teacher and student contributing to the failure of the latter in making adequate progress in the educational system (Harry, 1992).

Cultural differences could affect parent-teacher partnerships and communication. Teachers should become knowledgeable and sensitive to the Latino migrant family lifestyle and the challenges they face (Bradford, 1995). Migrant families are faced with an extraneous and bureaucratic educational system lead by educational professionals with little or no representation of Spanish speaking personnel (Lynch, & Hanson, 1998). Hence, school personnel must provide appropriate information in the families' native language to enhance their opportunity to navigate and participate in the educational system while eliminating the feeling of intimidation frequently expressed by these families. This becomes more critical for parents of children with disabilities as they must be involved in the decision making process for the appropriate educational placement and program planning of their children.

High mobility and interrupted schooling

One of the major challenges teachers of Latino migrant students face is the families' high mobility rate. Migrant families have seasonal jobs that respond to the agricultural crops and thus, students are constantly being relocated. Frequent school changes represent a challenge for the school system as teachers attempt to integrate the new student and document student progress.

When responding to the families' high mobility rate, teachers must be flexible in the school calendars to accommodate the incoming student. Developing a welcoming unit as a way to introduce and assess the child on skills and knowledge pertaining to the given grade level could facilitate the integration of the student to the group. Collecting and keeping an accurate academic portfolio to depict the students' academic performance becomes critical as the student relocates to different schools. Grades and other reports may not portray the reality about the student level of achievement and performance resulting in inappropriate placement and instruction.

Time Constraints

Parental involvement in education as conceived by many teachers requires parents to attend and participate in multiple school activities. The unique lifestyle of the migrant families is characterized by long working hours that begin at dawn and end at dusk. Most migrant workers are transported to the fields as they lack their own means of transportation. Consequently, to attend school activities during the week becomes an unfeasible task. Teachers who want to ensure parental participation among this population must consider evening or weekend activities as it best responds to the families' time constraints. Providing childcare and transportation will also increase the likeliness of

parents to participate in school activities. Schools should promote home visits and consider celebrating school activities at centers within the families' community to increase the number of participants. It is important as well to consider the participation and involvement of extended family members when planning these activities.

Isolation

It is not uncommon for families who migrate to feel isolated in their new environment. Families who migrate may face environmental, economic, and sociocultural transformations (Blank & Torecilha, 1998). Language barriers and culture shock are among the factors that affect their integration to the mainstream community. Teachers who are aware of this situation could reach out to the families and the community rather than assuming a passive role. To demonstrate their interest and sensitivity to the migrant families, teachers could contact the corresponding social services agencies in the community and serve as a liaison to provide families with information about the resources available in the community. Teachers could also develop partnerships with the agricultural industries to promote activities to enhance families' knowledge of their new environment and to promote the further development of their skills and talents.

In the classroom, teachers could provide social skills education to facilitate student interactions in their new social environment. School curriculum should also reflect students' cultures, values, and experiences to foster a sense of acceptance and belongingness. Parents could assist in this endeavor by providing items that reflect their cultural background as well as their new lifestyle. Schools could observe and celebrate the community's festivities and historical events as a mean of fostering social interactions and breaking down isolation barriers.

Conclusion

The lack of representation of Latino teachers serving the Latino migrant student population poses a challenge to mainstreamed teachers as they attempt to build healthy partnerships with parents to enhance students' success rates in education. Parental involvement among Latino migrant families is hindered by multiple factors that are intrinsic to their unique lifestyle. It is critical that teachers understand the conditions of such lifestyle and the strategies they could use to facilitate their partnership.

Incorporating resources to enhance the level of parental involvement among the Latino migrant population is a powerful way of validating the significant contributions of the migrant farmworker to their community and our nation. Teachers who become aware of their own cultural values and beliefs and who become knowledgeable about the Latino migrant lifestyle/culture are more likely to succeed in their goal to increase parental involvement. Efforts in overcoming the barriers that hinder parental involvement among this population will only ensure that all students receive the appropriate education they are entitled to receive in a nation that so highly values democracy and equity.

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